

# A Look into the Origins of Russian Strategic Culture

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## Key Points

- Russian strategic culture places emphasis on elements such as importance of history, national sovereignty and 'Russianness'<sup>1</sup>, strategic depth, great power status, military power and controlled information.
- Russia believes in the logic of power, not in the logic of reason; their perception of truth is not black or white; corruption is entrenched in society; and they accept authoritarian leadership.
- Acknowledging how Russian logic and communications differ from those of the West narrows the space for Russia to exploit any given opportunity.

## Introduction

Russia's worldview is shaped by its strategic culture.<sup>2</sup> Certain periods in history have a significant meaning in forming its strategic culture. These periods have influenced how Russians think about strong leaders, why autocracy is seen as a better option over democracy, why corruption is accepted, and why the perception of truth and lies are inherently different to those in the West. This paper looks into the key elements of Russian strategic culture and its origins, discusses the Russian invasion in Ukraine in context, and uses Russia's approach in Syria as a brief example, followed by conclusions and recommendations.

## History in influencing Russian thinking

If one investigates history from the perspective of Russian strategic culture, it can be divided roughly into six eras, which formed many of the motifs of Russian thinking as they grew atop another.<sup>3</sup>

1. **Slavic Russia:** This era can be seen as the basis of Russianness, during which the Russian language and ethnicity was formed, as well as the idea of unified Slavic people.

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<sup>1</sup> Russian patriotism, political idea of Russian nationalism, which emphasizes the importance of Russian identity, culture, traditions, history and how they influence the world. There is no equivalent in English.

<sup>2</sup> Russia's Strategic Culture and Worldview - Policy Implications for UK and its Allies, April 2021, [How+Russia+Views+the+World+-+Andrew+Foxall.pdf \(menlosecurity.com\)](#) (accessed on Mar 2, 2023)

<sup>3</sup> Russian Strategic Culture, April 4, 2022, [Russian strategic culture : Colonel Martti J. Kari \(ret\) : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#) (accessed on Apr 4, 2023)

2. **Byzantine Russia:** The fall of Constantinople began the era of Byzantine Russia. It influenced Russians on religion (orthodoxy), conservatism was rooted, and it influenced people's relations towards authority. Rulers' authority was seen as divine in origin and therefore not to be challenged.
3. **Mongolian rule:** The period of so-called Asian Russia influenced the culture of administration and governance. During this time, the authority was personified (and divine) and it was a time of corruption and cruelty. For many, corruption, along with lies, were means of survival. Russian words related to corruption, torture and taxation have their roots in the age of Mongolian rule.
4. **Era of turmoil:** Early 17<sup>th</sup> century was short but important. During this time, society collapsed and fell into chaos. From this time comes the fear of invasion and external enemies and turmoil (Poland invaded Moscow). When Romanov came to power as Czar of Russia, he managed to calm the society, which further rooted the idea that a strong autocratic leader is needed to keep away chaos and unrest.
5. **European Russia:** In this era St. Petersburg was founded (18<sup>th</sup> century), the mystification of Russia started, and it was debated whether Russia was more European or Asian. The era is seen as broadly important in Russia, i.e. for the bloom of Russian culture.
6. **Russian Great Power:** During this time (early 19<sup>th</sup> and late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) Russia expanded and used hard power; it was the era of the Soviet Union and geopolitics as well as the continuation of authoritarian rule. In addition, this period taught Russians about the sphere of influence (WWII, Soviet Union, Warsaw Pact).

These are the eras influencing Russian strategic culture today – “there is not one Russia, but many.”<sup>4</sup> History is very important in Russia, and in many cases, Russians see the world through historic lenses. The Kremlin exploits this as it rewrites and twists history, done to influence its people and its adversaries.

Russia places a high value on national sovereignty and independence and is wary of foreign interference in its domestic affairs. This stems from centuries of struggle against invasions and colonization and is reflected in Russia's assertive foreign policy.<sup>5</sup> Russianness is related to the political idea of Russian nationalism, which emphasizes the importance of Russian identity, culture, and history. It cannot be directly translated as there is no equivalent to Russianness in English. Although the idea of ‘Russianness’ is considered a bit ambiguous and it has been defined variously and related to a context,<sup>6</sup> it is still based on the comprehensive idea of Russians incorporating the core culture of Russia through traditions, history, and Russian language and how they influence the world. It is directly connected to the idea of ‘Russian World’, and it is an idea of social totality.<sup>7</sup> Putin uses these as the basis for his rhetoric on how Russia has a historic mission to rectify perceived wrongs.<sup>8</sup> Putin's Russia, in contrast to the West, believes that it has a unique civilization and culture that must be protected, something that is incompatible with Western views.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Evaluation of Russia by Finnish Intelligence Colonel (subtitles), December 3, 2018, [Evaluation of Russia by Finnish Intelligence Colonel \(subtitles\) | December 3, 2018 - YouTube](#) (accessed on Mar 3, 2023)

<sup>5</sup> Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security, January 10, 2018, [PUTIN'S ASYMMETRIC ASSAULT ON DEMOCRACY IN RUSSIA AND EUROPE: IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY \(govinfo.gov\)](#) (accessed on Apr 16, 2023)

<sup>6</sup> Russia's Adaptation Game: Deciphering the Kremlin's “Humanitarian Policy”, December 14, 2022, [Russia's Adaptation Game: Deciphering the Kremlin's “Humanitarian Policy” \(csis.org\)](#) (accessed on Apr 11, 2023)

<sup>7</sup> Mainstream Russian Nationalism and the “State-Civilization” Identity: Perspectives from Below, January 19, 2020, [FULLTEXT01.pdf \(menlosecurity.com\)](#) (accessed on Apr 11, 2023)

<sup>8</sup> Nationalist and Imperial Thinking Define Putin's Vision for Russia, March 2, 2022, Nationalist and Imperial Thinking Define Putin's Vision for Russia | Royal United Services Institute (rusi.org) (accessed on Apr 11, 2023), The New Russian Nationalism, 2016, [project\\_muse\\_64135-2280034.pdf \(menlosecurity.com\)](#) (accessed on Apr 12, 2023)

<sup>9</sup> “The West” in Russian Mentality, 2000, [diliguenski.pdf \(menlosecurity.com\)](#) (accessed on March 23, 2023)

## Strategic Depth and Suspicion of the West

Russian strategic culture has a character of vulnerability. Russia's vast territory and vulnerable borders (plains from the heart of Europe to Ural Mountains) have led it to prioritize strategic depth and buffer zones as a means of protecting itself from external threats.<sup>10</sup> Russia is deeply suspicious of Western intentions and sees the US and its allies as a threat. The feeling of being threatened comes from historical conflicts and geopolitical competition and is reflected in Russia's support for anti-Western movements and opposition to Western-led initiatives. One of the lessons Russia learned from WWII was that it is better to fight wars abroad than in the homeland.<sup>11</sup> Historically Russia expanded into neighboring territories, and it has put efforts to maintain influence in the "near abroad." But the expansionism is also more than just protecting Russia; it is to colonize and enable Russia to exploit neighboring resources. An assertive foreign policy and the invasion of Ukraine are both the manifestation of strategic depth and distrust of the West.<sup>12</sup>

## Great Power Status and Military Power

Russia sees itself as a great power with a unique role in world affairs. This perception comes from culture, history, and geography of being the largest country in the world,<sup>13</sup> and it is related to the feeling of vulnerability and the need for strategic depth. Russia is in many ways the heir of the Soviet Union. Putin himself said in 2005 that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century.<sup>14</sup> He repeated that notion in 2018 when he said that "the collapse of the Soviet Union" was the one Russian historical event he would like to change.<sup>15</sup> Russia being an heir to the Soviet Union means that there is a cognitive and geographic legacy of Russia being a Great Power, so it feeds the idea of correcting historic injustices (collapse of Soviet Union, shrinking sphere of influence).

Russia places great emphasis on military power as a key element of national security. This is reflected in its extensive nuclear arsenal, in the efforts to modernize its armed forces (the success of the modernization is disputed) and in its willingness to use force to serve its interests, as we have tragically seen in Ukraine. The Russian military reflects their great power status and the size of the country, and it feels that it has the right to use its military accordingly. Former US diplomat George Kennan, who understood Russia, said in 1946 that the Soviet Union was "Impervious to logic of reason, and it is highly sensitive to logic of force."<sup>16</sup> This is evident looking back to the wars in Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine. But Kennan also said that the Soviet Union would project force [only] as long as there is not enough resistance.<sup>17</sup> The Russian invasion of Ukraine reflects what Kennan said. Putin thought that the war would be over in a couple of days – which turned out to be something quite different; resistance was there, but Putin was

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<sup>10</sup> Etched in Stone: Russian Strategic Culture and the Future of Transatlantic Security, September 8, 2020, [Etched in Stone: Russian Strategic Culture and the Future of Transatlantic Security - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) (accessed on Apr 12, 2023), The Roots of Russian Conduct, July 13, 2021, [The Roots of Russian Conduct \(nti.org\)](#) (accessed on Apr 12, 2023)

<sup>11</sup> Russian Strategic Culture, April 4, 2022, [Russian strategic culture : Colonel Martti J. Kari \(ret\) : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#) (accessed on Apr 12, 2023)

<sup>12</sup> Russian Strategic Intention, May, 2019, [russian-strategic-intentions.pdf \(menlosecurity.com\)](#) (accessed on Mar 23, 2023)

<sup>13</sup> The Russian Bear: Russian Strategic Culture and What it Implies for the West, 2009, [The Russian Bear Russian Strategic Culture and What it Implies for the West on JSTOR](#) (accessed on Apr 17, 2023), Moscow's Strategic Culture, Russian Militarism in an Era of Great Power Competition, 2022, [Moscow's Strategic Culture: Russian Militarism in an Era of Great Power Competition \(usmcu.edu\)](#) (accessed on Apr 17, 2023)

<sup>14</sup> Putin, before vote, says he'd reverse Soviet collapse if he could: agencies, March 2, 2018, [Putin, before vote, says he'd reverse Soviet collapse if he could: agencies | Reuters](#) (accessed on Apr 17, 2023)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> George Kennan's 'Long Telegram', 1946, [George Kennan's "Long Telegram" \(gwu.edu\)](#) (accessed on Apr 17, 2023)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

misinformed. Ukraine and, especially its strongest ally, the US, did not communicate clearly and strongly enough to Russia their resoluteness and the consequences when Russia threatened war, leading to Russia trying to conquer all of Ukraine. Since then, the US and the West have been clearer towards Russia, so it has abstained from significant escalation and refrained from using (tactical) nuclear weapons. One can find the same logic of power when looking into Russia influencing by other means, something that Europe was recently forced to wake up to. Russia will respond to displays of power, not necessarily to appeals to reason.<sup>18</sup> To understand Russia, it is vital to understand the difference in logic.

### **Controlled Information, Hierarchy and Corruption**

The 'grand narrative' in Russia is that it is surrounded by enemies seeking to weaken or destroy Russia, with NATO and the West being the main enemy. Many people think these messages are true.<sup>19</sup> According to Levada's survey done in March 2022, 62% of Russians get their news from traditional media like TV.<sup>20</sup> More recently, people are told that the reason for war in Ukraine is de-nazifying and even de-satanizing Ukraine. Astonishingly, many people believe this to be true because of years of managed information and propaganda. The Nazis are portrayed as the ultimate enemy and defeating them in WWII has crucial significance in modern national narratives. Defeating Nazis in WWII has almost cult-like status in Russia. Russians also accept the story because of their historical faith in the "righteous and strong leader" and in return managed information supports this perception. The narrative serves the regime in justifying the strong security system – which is at least as much to control the people of Russia as it is to control the threats from outside – and information management is part of the regime's internal security network. The Kremlin largely controls not only the media, but also social media and the internet. There are still a few free media outlets, but the Kremlin suppresses them in various ways and many of them have relocated out of the country since the invasion.<sup>21</sup> The control of the media has tightened as the Kremlin has imposed laws incriminating independent reporting of the war.<sup>22</sup> By controlling information, the Kremlin controls the narrative, and with narrative, it controls people. Today, there is a popular saying in Russia that describes the propaganda environment quite perceptively: *While we we're worried that internet will ruin our children, TV destroyed our parents.*<sup>23</sup>

Russian society is hierarchical. Russians do not challenge authoritarian leadership meaningfully because they are used to it and the majority are afraid of the uncertainty of not having a strong leader. In Russian hierarchy, for example, boyars<sup>24</sup> have a very important role in securing the Kremlin's power structure. Putin, the Czar, is at the top of the structure and below him are the boyars. Boyars protect the structure for the strong leader – If mistakes are made, they are made by boyars and they are to blame, not the Czar. Oligarchs are a contemporary version of boyars, but they follow unwritten rules that date back centuries to a time when there was no ownership but tenure, and it

<sup>18</sup> Evaluation of Russia by Finnish Intelligence Colonel (subtitles), December 3, 2018, [Evaluation of Russia by Finnish Intelligence Colonel \(subtitles\) | December 3, 2018 - YouTube](#) (accessed on May 24, 2023)

<sup>19</sup> Moscow's Strategic Culture, Russian Militarism in an Era of Great Power Competition, 2022, [Moscow's Strategic Culture: Russian Militarism in an Era of Great Power Competition \(usmcu.edu\)](#) (accessed on Apr 20, 2023)

<sup>20</sup> How Russians see Russia, March 14, 2022, [How Russians see Russia – Harvard Gazette](#) (accessed on Apr 6, 2023)

<sup>21</sup> Independent Media is Key to Democracy in Russia and Lasting Peace in Europe, December 24, 2022, [Independent Media Is Key to Democracy in Russia and Lasting Peace in Europe | Free Russia Foundation \(4freerussia.org\)](#) (accessed on Apr 18, 2023), Free to leave? Independent media in Russia, March 15, 2021, [Free to leave? Independent media in Russia - Atlantic Council](#) (accessed on Apr 18, 2023)

<sup>22</sup> Russia Makes Calling Ukraine War an 'Invasion' a Criminal Offense, Marc 4, 2022, [Russia Makes Calling Ukraine War an 'Invasion' a Criminal Offense \(newsweek.com\)](#) (accessed on Apr 6, 2023)

<sup>23</sup> Pelon maa, June 18, 2023, [Tämä kaikki minua kotimaassani Venäjällä nyt pelottaa - Ulkomaat | HS.fi](#) (accessed on Jun 18, 2023)

<sup>24</sup> A boyar or bolyar was a member of the highest rank of the feudal nobility in many Eastern European states, including Kievan Rus', Bulgaria, Russia, Wallachia and Moldavia, and later Romania, Lithuania and among Baltic Germans.

rooted corruption. Today, stealing is still accepted in a certain way, but there are limits to how much one can steal based on their status, and there are certain people from whom one cannot steal.<sup>25</sup> Certain level officers may also be seen as boyars and they take their share of corruption; commonly, Russian military units may not have equipment because their commanders sold it, and some Russians are complaining in social media that they have to bribe their commanders to go on leave. The poor success in Ukraine is also the boyars' fault. Putin is a flawless leader, so it is the boyars who mess things up.

Corruption has a long history in Russia, and it has significant impacts on Russian strategic culture. Corruption is harmful in many ways, as it undermines trust in state institutions, erodes public support for the government, and weakens the rule of law. In Russia, corruption has hindered economic development by diverting resources away from productive investments and into the pockets of corrupt officials. This has contributed to a lack of innovation and competitiveness, as well as to perpetuating poverty and inequality. Corruption is invested in the Russian armed forces and causes deficiencies in training and equipment and weakens overall performance.<sup>26</sup> The effects of corruption are some of the reasons why, before the war in Ukraine, Putin invested more in internal security structures (meaning in his regime's security) than against external threats.

### **Fitting Truth**

Russians have a profoundly different idea of truth than in the West. There is no clear line between the truth and lies; rather there are many levels of truths and lies. For one thing, the Russian word "Pravda" is something that one researcher aptly calls "Tactical truth."<sup>27</sup> It may be true, but not the absolute truth. It means that you can tell a little lie suited for the situation if it benefits you and those with you. With tactical truth, one can bend the truth and escape from a difficult or unpleasant situation. Similar to Pravda is "Vranyo", which is something like Pravda, but on a strategic level. If someone is using Pravda or Vranyo, Russians know that they are not telling the truth, and that is accepted, while people in the West are unaware of it.<sup>28</sup> Both Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov use strategic or tactical "truth" as well. We have seen this on many occasions, i.e., when Putin denied having any knowledge of who the "little green men" invading Crimea in 2014 were, and more recently Lavrov said about the invasion of Ukraine that Russia was trying to stop the war that was "launched against Russia using Ukrainian people."<sup>29</sup>

### **A Brief Assessment on How Strategic Culture is Reflected in Russian Actions in Syria**

Russian actions in Syria and the Middle East are no special case of Russian strategic culture, but rather it is clearly displayed in Syria. The Russian operation in Syria demonstrated "a holistic approach to strategy and operations, recklessness and disconnect between words and deeds," and a willingness to use military force to achieve political

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<sup>25</sup> Evaluation of Russia by Finnish Intelligence Colonel (subtitles), December 3, 2018, [Evaluation of Russia by Finnish Intelligence Colonel \(subtitles\) | December 3, 2018 - YouTube](#) (accessed on May 15, 2023)

<sup>26</sup> Corruption in the Russian Armed Forces, May 12, 2022, [Corruption in the Russian Armed Forces | Royal United Services Institute \(rusi.org\)](#) (accessed on May 24, 2023)

<sup>27</sup> The term "Tactical truth" is used by Professor of Practice, COL PhD. Martti J. Kari, who is a former Finnish intelligent officer and an expert on Russia. He has university degrees in Russian language (MA), international law (MA), Cyber security (MA) and Arabic and Islamic studies (BA). His Doctoral thesis was on Russian cyber threat perception.

<sup>28</sup> Evaluation of Russia by Finnish Intelligence Colonel (subtitles), December 3, 2018, [Evaluation of Russia by Finnish Intelligence Colonel \(subtitles\) | December 3, 2018 - YouTube](#) (accessed on Mar 3, 2023)

<sup>29</sup> Video: Crowd Laughs at Russia's Top Diplomat as He Blames Ukraine for War, Mar 3, 2023, [Video: Crowd Laughs at Russia's Top Diplomat as He Blames Ukraine for War \(newsweek.com\)](#) (accessed on May 16, 2023)

goals.<sup>30</sup> Overall, Russia's actions in Syria and the Middle East reflect a combination of historical aspirations, strategic calculations, and cultural values that characterize its strategic culture. Here are some points that highlight the reflection of strategic culture through the actions in Syria.

1. **National Sovereignty:** Russia's actions in Syria are consistent with its emphasis on national sovereignty and opposition to foreign interference in the internal affairs of other states. By supporting the Syrian government against rebels and foreign-backed militants, Russia was able to support a long-standing ally and prevent what it saw as a potential regime change operation. Having likeminded leaders in authoritarian countries supports the current rulers in the Kremlin.
2. **Strategic Depth:** Russia's military operations in Syria are also consistent with its emphasis on strategic depth and buffer zones as a means of protecting its borders and projecting influence. By establishing a military presence in Syria, Russia was able to expand its strategic depth in the Middle East and protect its interests in the region. In Syria, Russia expands its sphere of influence and has a direct access to the Mediterranean Sea as well as better control of access to the Black Sea. In the Russian view, operations in Syria serves to protect their "national interests" outside Russian borders.<sup>31</sup>
3. **Great Power Status:** Russia's intervention in Syria was a clear assertion of its status as a great power with the ability to project military force beyond its borders. This was consistent with its historical aspirations to be a major player in world affairs and to maintain a sphere of influence in the Middle East.
4. **Military Power:** In Syria, Russia has demonstrated its military capabilities and willingness to use force to protect its interests. The use of Wagner PMC reflects strategic culture in many ways, most clearly being part of military power. This is consistent with Russia's emphasis on military power as a key element of national security.
5. **Cooperation with Authoritarian Regimes:** Russia's support for the Syrian government and other authoritarian regimes in the region is consistent with its emphasis on traditional and conservative values, including a strong state and centralized power. By supporting regimes that share these values, Russia has been able to strengthen its position as a regional power and support allies that could help advance its strategic objectives.
6. **Controlled Information:** Russia has used state-controlled media to shape the narrative about Syria and to support al-Assad; one of these media outlets is RT (after the invasion in Ukraine RT was banned in many countries). By controlling certain areas in Syria, including airspace, Russia can control the flow of information. By controlling the narrative, Russia gained leverage to negotiate with other countries.

Looking into Russian actions, structures etc. in Syria, one can also find clear signs of the rest of the features mentioned in this paper: hierarchy, corruption, and fitting truth. For example, corruption is widespread in Syria and Russia has been on both ends of it. Corruption within the military and other government organizations is there; Russian actions have exacerbated corruption in Syria; it has used corruption to retain influence in the country; and oligarchs have exploited business opportunities with a corrupt regime. For the case of fitting truth, Russia claimed that "Britain was directly involved" in the chemical attack in Syria in 2018, when the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) concluded that Syrian government forces were behind the attack.<sup>32</sup> Operating the Wagner PMC in Syria gives Russia more possibilities to use "tactical truth."

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<sup>30</sup> Continuity in Russian Strategic Culture: A Case Study of Moscow's Syrian Campaign, February, 2020, [Continuity in Russian Strategic Culture: A Case Study of Moscow's Syrian Campaign | George C. Marshall European Center For Security Studies \(marshallcenter.org\)](https://www.marshallcenter.org/continuity-in-russian-strategic-culture-a-case-study-of-moscows-syrian-campaign/) (accessed on May 23, 2023)

<sup>31</sup> Russia's Strategic Success in Syria and the Future of Moscow's Middle East Policy, January 2023, 2022, [Russia's Strategic Success in Syria and the Future of Moscow's Middle East Policy | The Washington Institute](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/perspectives/analysis/russias-strategic-success-in-syria-and-the-future-of-moscows-middle-east-policy/) (accessed on Jun 26, 2023)

<sup>32</sup> OPCW blames Syria gov't for 2018 chlorine gas attack in Douma, January 27, 2023, [OPCW blames Syria gov't for 2018 chlorine gas attack in Douma | Syria's War News | Al Jazeera](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/27/opcw-blames-syria-govt-for-2018-chlorine-gas-attack-in-douma/) (accessed on Jun 26, 2023)

## Conclusions

Knowing Russian strategic culture and where it comes from allows us to understand and explain why Russia does things the way it does – in many cases very differently compared to Western strategies or logic.<sup>33</sup> At best, an understanding of strategic culture can give insight into the Russian decision-making process, supports anticipating likely actions to specific situations, and enables developing strategies that better respond to the threat posed by Russia. This is true in Syria, in the CENTCOM AOR and elsewhere.

In Syria, Russia is exercising all the means available to control both the physical and cognitive space for its own interests, and this behavior displays all the key features of Russian strategic culture: actions follow strategic culture. Since the invasion of Ukraine, one can argue that Russia may have lost some of its weight globally as the invasion exposed the true colors of Putin and Russia to countries who had not yet acknowledged them. But this perception can be deceiving, and it is not the full picture. In Syria, Russia has a strong hold beside al-Assad. Russia holds a lot of influence and is an actor that cannot be overlooked when e.g., the Arab League is resetting ties with al-Assad. Russia is in fact growing stronger in Syria: al-Assad needs Russian troops to contain the Iranian influence in Syria, and Putin can still provide. The intensifying strategic competition works in balance for Russia as well. Regional countries are seeking to make the best of the opportunities presented – from which great power those opportunities come from has less importance.

What implications does Russia's strategic culture have for the future? There is no reason to believe that Russia's actions are likely to take any change. Peter Drucker is purported to have said that “culture eats strategy for breakfast.”<sup>34</sup> Strategic culture is formed through centuries, and it takes at least decades to change expressively – unless there is a black swan big enough to change the course. There were few of them, one of which was the collapse of the Soviet Union. It changed the course for years, but still the strategic culture prevailed. For the time being, we can expect to see more of the same assertive and aggressive actions we have seen in recent decades, as Russian strategic culture is etched in its policies. One document highlighting it is “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation,” published on March 31, 2023.<sup>35</sup> The document contains all the key elements of strategic culture – we even find some ‘Vranyo’ in it: “[...] the ability to ensure harmonious coexistence [...] as well as ensuring conditions for the peaceful progressive development of humanity [...]”<sup>36</sup>

Cultural differences will mean that Russia's actions and reactions are likely to differ from the West - our approach in dealing with them, including in the Middle East, should be cognizant of this. To paraphrase Kennan, Russia will try to find weak spots as long as it is not stopped by a strong point. Russia is likely to remain assertive and project its influence in the CENTCOM AOR as much as possible and as long as there is room for it. Because of this, and for the reason of different logic, strategies and policies towards Russia must be evaluated and, if necessary, revised. But we must not fall into the trap of using a Western perspective, since Russian strategic culture cannot be evaluated with Western criteria. The criteria must be chosen carefully to work better with the features of Russian strategic culture and especially with their different logic.

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<sup>33</sup> Evaluation of Russia by Finnish Intelligence Colonel (subtitles), December 3, 2018, [Evaluation of Russia by Finnish Intelligence Colonel \(subtitles\) | December 3, 2018 - YouTube](#) (accessed on Mar 3, 2023)

<sup>34</sup> Why Does Culture 'Eat Strategy For Breakfast?', November 20, 2018, [Why Does Culture 'Eat Strategy For Breakfast'? \(forbes.com\)](#) (accessed on May 31, 2023)

<sup>35</sup> The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, March 31, 2023, [The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation \(mid.ru\)](#) (accessed on May 31, 2023)

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

In general, a soft approach and concessions have not resulted in lasting success with Russia. Russia does not hesitate to use force if there is a probability for success, and it will continue to do so if it is not stopped. Russia perceives the truth very differently and openly tells lies in a way that may seem mind boggling to us in the West. When dealing with Russia, even with its lies, diplomacy is needed, but the communications need to be very clear and with a hard edge; if there is room for interpretation, or the message is weak, Russia will continue to seek opportunities to advance its destructive behavior.

Any reduction in Western force levels in the AOR could well be perceived by Russia as weakness to be further exploited. At the same time, communications with allies and partners needs to be clear and show the US commitment in the AOR. With less boots on the ground, cooperation with allies and partners is paramount to contain Russian influence, and even more so in the looming threat of a stronger alignment of Russia, China, and Iran.

### **Recommendations for the US/USCENTCOM**

- Evaluate current strategies towards Russia in the AOR through the perspective of strategic culture and revise them if needed.
- Showing strength where the advancing Russian influence needs to be stopped and contained. This can be done with the direct presence of military force, clear demonstration of the ability to project power, or by galvanizing likeminded allies and partners to counterbalance malign Russian influence.
- Communicate intent clearly with Russia, either directly or through allies and partners.
- Fight for the facts and truth by continually exposing Russian lies as a joint effort with allies and partners.